

BELARUS 2020 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution grants individuals freedom to profess and practice any religious belief but prohibits religious activities directed against the sovereignty of the state, its constitutional system, and “civic harmony.” A concordat grants the Belarusian Orthodox Church (BOC) rights and privileges not granted to other religious groups, although the law also acknowledges the historical importance of the “traditional faiths” of Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. By law, all registered religious groups must seek permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing activities, and must obtain prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The law prohibits all religious activity by unregistered groups. The country experienced massive peaceful protests met with what most observers considered a brutal government crackdown following the August 9 presidential election, which civil society and human rights groups, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the EU, the United Kingdom, and the United States, among others, stated was fraudulent. Demonstrators protested electoral fraud, and authorities responded with widespread violence against peaceful protesters, the opposition, journalists, and ordinary citizens. Most of those detained, jailed, or fined – including clergy – were charged indiscriminately with “organizing or participating in unauthorized mass events.” Authorities continued their surveillance of minority and unregistered religious groups. Religious groups met less frequently at their own discretion due to COVID-19 infection concerns. At the same time, authorities focused less on monitoring religious groups as they were preoccupied with other issues, including the COVID-19 pandemic, a struggling economy, the presidential campaign, and the election-related protests that followed. Some minority religious groups, including Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to have difficulty registering, and most said they avoided trying to register during the year because of COVID-19 and the unsettled political situation. Roman Catholic groups again stated the government denied visas and requests to extend the stay of some foreign clergy (notably priests from Poland). On August 31, the government blocked the return of Catholic Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz from a visit to Poland, despite his being a Belarusian citizen. Authorities allowed the Archbishop to return on December 23. Throughout the year, authorities continued to support commemoration of victims of the Holocaust and preservation of Jewish cemeteries.

Anti-Semitic comments appeared on social media and in comment sections of local online news articles, although it was not clear that all of the comments could be

attributed to Belarusians. Interdenominational Christian groups continued to work together on education and charitable projects.

Throughout the year, the *Charge d’Affaires* and other U.S. embassy officials regularly engaged with the government, including at the highest levels, on religious freedom issues, including registration of religious communities, the return of Archbishop Kondruszewicz, and anti-Semitism. The Secretary of State and Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom publicly called on the country’s authorities to allow Archbishop Kondruszewicz to reenter the country and lead the Roman Catholic Church there. The Charge d’Affaires and other embassy officials met with Jewish groups to discuss anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage. Embassy officials also met with Orthodox Christians, Roman Catholics, Protestants, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and other groups as well as with civil society activists and lawyers for religious groups to learn about their religious activities and discuss government actions affecting the exercise of religious freedom.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 9.5 million (midyear 2020 estimate). According to a 2016 survey by the state Information and Analytical Center of the Presidential Administration (the latest such data available), approximately 53 percent of the adult population belongs to the BOC and six percent to the Roman Catholic Church. According to the state survey, eight percent of the adult population is atheist, and 22 percent is “uncertain.” Smaller religious groups together constituting approximately two percent of the population include Jews, Muslims, Greek Catholics (“Uniates” or members of the Belarusian Greek Catholic Church), Old Believers (priestist and priestless), members of the Belarusian Autocephalous Orthodox Church and other Orthodox Christian groups, Lutherans, Jehovah’s Witnesses, Apostolic Christians, Presbyterians and other Protestant groups, Armenian Apostolics, Latin Catholics, members of the International Society of Krishna Consciousness, Baha’is, members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and Buddhists. Jewish groups state there are between 30,000 and 40,000 Jews. Most ethnic Poles, who constitute approximately 3 percent of the population, are Roman Catholic.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution grants individuals the freedom to profess any religious belief and participating in the performance of acts of worship is not prohibited by law. It stipulates all faiths are equal before the law. The constitution states relations between the state and religious organizations shall be regulated by the law “with regard to their influence on the formation of the spiritual, cultural, and state traditions of the Belarusian people.” It prohibits activities by religious groups that are directed against the country’s sovereignty, its constitutional system, and civic harmony; involve a violation of civil rights and liberties; “impede the execution of state, public, and family duties” by its citizens; or are detrimental to public health and morality. The constitution states the law shall determine the conditions for exemption from military service and the performance of alternative service as a substitute.

The Office of the Plenipotentiary Representative for Religious and Nationality Affairs (OPRRNA) regulates all religious matters. The office takes part in drafting and implementing state policies on religious affairs, enforces and protects religious rights and freedom, monitors activities of religious organizations and compliance with their charters, regulates relations between the state and religious organizations, liaises with state agencies and religious organizations upon their request, promotes tolerance and mutual understanding between religious organizations of various faiths and nationalities, and researches dynamics and trends in interdenominational relations to prevent “religious exclusiveness” and disrespectful treatment of religions and nationalities. OPRRNA has one deputy and the office has two subdivisions, a section for religious affairs and a section for nationalities affairs. The executive committees of the country’s six regions and Minsk city have departments for ideology and youth engagement, which include religious issues. These departments are independent from OPRRNA but share information. The plenipotentiary representative heading OPRRNA is appointed and dismissed by the President, based on a nomination from the Council of Ministers. The plenipotentiary office performs the functions of a government body and is subordinate to the Council of Ministers.

The law recognizes the “determining role” of the BOC, an exarchate (affiliate) of the Russian Orthodox Church, in the development of the traditions of the people, as well as the historical importance of religious groups commonly referred to as “traditional” faiths: Catholicism, Judaism, Islam, and evangelical Lutheranism. The law does not consider as traditional faiths newer religious groups or older groups such as the priestless Old Believers, Greek Catholics (Uniates), and the Calvinist churches, which have roots in the country dating to the 17th century.

A concordat between the government and the BOC provides the Church with autonomy in its internal affairs, freedom to perform religious rites and other activities, and a special relationship with the state. The concordat recognizes the BOC's "influence on the formation of spiritual, cultural, and national traditions of the Belarusian people." Although it states it does not limit the religious freedom of other religious groups, the concordat calls for the government and the BOC to combat unnamed "pseudo-religious structures that present a danger to individuals and society." The BOC, unlike other religious communities, receives state subsidies. In addition, the BOC possesses the exclusive right to use the word "orthodox" in its title and to use as its symbol the double-barred image of the Cross of Saint Euphrosyne, the country's Orthodox patron saint.

The concordat serves as the framework for agreements between the BOC and individual state agencies. There are at least a dozen agreements, including with the Ministries of Defense, Health Care, and Information. There is also an agreement with the Ministry of Education through 2020 that provides for joint projects for the "spiritual and moral education" of students based on BOC traditions and history.

The law establishes three tiers of registered religious groups: religious communities, religious associations, and national religious associations. Religious communities must include at least 20 persons older than 18 who live in one or several adjoining areas. Religious associations must include at least 10 religious communities, and one of these communities must have been active in the country for at least 20 years. National-level religious associations have the ability to institute regional and local level religious associations. National religious associations may be formed only when they comprise active religious communities in at least four of the country's six regions.

According to OPRRNA data, as of January 1, there were 25 religious faiths and denominations registered in the country, encompassing 3,389 religious communities and 174 religious associations, monasteries, missions, brotherhoods, sisterhoods, and schools. The BOC has 1,709 religious communities, 15 dioceses, six schools, 35 monasteries, one mission, 15 brotherhoods, and 10 sisterhoods. (The latter two are clergy-led lay organizations.) The Roman Catholic Church has four dioceses, six schools, 11 missions, nine monasteries, and 498 communities. Protestant religious organizations of 13 denominations encompass 1,038 religious communities, 21 associations, 22 missions, and five schools. There are 34 registered religious communities of Old Believers. There are three Jewish religious associations – Orthodox, Chabad-Lubavitch, and Reform Judaism –

comprising 53 communities, including 10 autonomous communities. In addition, 24 Muslim religious communities – 23 Sunni and one Shia – are registered.

The national religious associations are the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Old Believers Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Christians of Evangelical Faith, Confederation of Christian Seventh-day Adventists, Association of New Apostolic Churches, Union of Full Gospel Christian Churches, Association of Jehovah's Witnesses, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, Jewish Religious Union, Association of Jewish Religious Communities, Union of Reform Judaism Communities, Muslim Religious Association, Spiritual Board of Muslims, and the Religious Association of Baha'is.

To register, a religious community must submit an official application containing the following information: a list of its founders' names, places of residence, citizenship, and signatures; copies of its founding statutes; the minutes of its founding meeting; and permission from regional authorities confirming the community's right to occupy or use any property referenced in its founding statutes. A religious group not previously registered by the government must also submit information about its beliefs. The law stipulates authorities may take up to six months to review a new registration application due to an additional evaluation of the religion by a state-appointed religious commission of experts. The commission evaluates the fundamental teachings of the religion as well as its rituals, practices, history, and forms and methods of activities; welfare and charitable services; proselytizing and missionary activities; approaches toward marriage and family; educational activities; attitudes toward health care; and compliance with legal requirements. In addition, the community must submit any texts written by its founder or considered sacred by the followers of the religion, information about prohibitions on clergy or adherents, a list of countries where the religion is widely practiced, and a list of countries officially recognizing the religion. It also must submit information about countries that have refused to recognize the religion and information about court cases against followers of the religion in other countries.

Regional government authorities as well as Minsk city authorities or local municipal authorities (for groups outside of Minsk) review all registration applications. Permissible grounds for denial of registration include failure to comply with requirements for establishing a community, an inconsistent or fraudulent charter or other required document, violations of the procedures to establish religious organizations, and a negative evaluation by the state-appointed religious commission of experts. Communities may appeal refusals in court.

To register as a religious association or national religious association, a group must provide an official application with a copy of the founding statutes, a list of members of the managing body with biographical information, proof of permission for the association to be at its designated location, and the minutes from its founding congress. Religious associations have the exclusive right to establish religious educational institutions and organize cloistered and monastic communities. All applications to establish religious associations and national associations must be submitted to OPRRNA, which has 30 days to respond. Grounds for refusal are the same as for religious communities, except they also include failure to comply with requirements for establishing an association rather than a community. Refusals or a failure by OPRRNA to respond within the 30-day period may be appealed in court.

The law confines the activities of religious communities and associations to the jurisdictional area where they are registered. The law permits state agencies in charge of registration to issue written warnings to a registered religious group for violating any law or undertaking activities outside the scope of responsibilities in the group's charter. The government may apply to a relevant court, depending upon jurisdiction, to shut down the group if it has not ceased the illegal activity outlined in the written warning within six months or if the activity is repeated within one year of the warning. The government may suspend activities of the religious group pending the court's decision. The law does not contain a provision for appealing a warning or suspension.

Under the administrative code, individuals may be fined up to five weeks' average wage – 1,350 rubles (\$516) – for organizing, running, or participating in unregistered religious organizations.

The housing code permits religious groups to hold services at residential premises if local authorities grant permission. Local authorities must certify the premises comply with a number of regulations, including fire safety, sanitary, and health code requirements. The government does not grant such permission automatically, and the law does not permit religious groups to hold services in private residences without prior permission from local authorities.

By law, all religious groups must obtain permits to hold events outside of their premises, including proselytizing.

The law requires organizers to notify authorities of a mass event, including those involving religious groups, planned at a designated location no later than 10 days before the event. Authorities must inform organizers of a denial no later than five days before the event. Denials may be issued for one of two reasons: the event conflicts with one organized by a different individual or group; or the notification does not comply with regulations. Organizers of mass events outside designated locations must apply at least 15 days in advance, and authorities are required to respond no later than five days prior to the event.

The government has a system of reimbursements for security, medical, and cleaning services required from organizers of mass events, including religious events held outside of religious premises and sites, rallies, competitions, cultural events, festivals, concerts, and similar occasions. If an application is approved, organizers must sign contracts for such services two days in advance and must reimburse all costs within 10 days.

The law requires all religious groups to receive prior governmental approval to import and distribute religious literature. The approval process includes official examination of the documents by state-appointed religious studies experts.

Although there is no law providing for a systematic restitution process for property, including religious property, seized during the Soviet and Nazi periods, groups may apply for restitution to local authorities. The law on religion specifically bans the restitution of seized property being used for cultural or sports purposes

The law permits associations and national associations to establish schools to train clergy but does not permit religious communities to do so.

The law permits only registered religious groups that are members of national religious associations to organize extracurricular religious activities at educational institutions. The law states the national religious association must first conclude an agreement on cooperation with the Ministry of Education; the BOC is the only religious group to have such an agreement. Students who wish to participate in voluntary “moral, civic, and patriotic education” in collaboration with religious groups must either provide a written statement expressing their desire to participate or secure their legal guardians’ approval. According to the law, “Such education shall raise awareness among the youth against any religious groups whose activities are aimed at undermining Belarus’s sovereignty, civic accord, and constitutional system or at violating human rights and freedoms.”

The law prohibits religious groups from conducting activities in any school without identifying themselves. It also prohibits visits from representatives of foreign religious groups; missionary activities; collections of donations or fees from students for religious groups or any charity; distribution of religious literature, audio, video, and other religious materials; holding prayer services, religious rituals, rites, or ceremonies; and placing religious symbols or paraphernalia at educational institutions.

The law does not allow private religious elementary, junior, or senior high schools or homeschooling for religious reasons.

The law establishes penalties ranging from fines to five years in prison for failure to fulfill mandatory military service, with an exemption for conscientious objectors for religious reasons. The law allows alternative civilian service for conscientious objectors. By law, individuals who evade alternative civilian service may face up to five years in prison.

Only registered religious associations may apply to OPRRNA for permission to invite foreign clergy to the country. OPRRNA must grant permission before foreign clergy may serve in local congregations, teach or study at local institutions, or participate in charitable work. The government generally grants such permission for a period of one year, which may be reduced or extended. OPRRNA has 30 days to respond to requests for foreign clergy permits (religious visas) and may deny requests without explanation. There is no provision for appeals.

By law, the government permits foreign missionaries to engage in religious activity only in the territorial area where their religious association is registered. Transfers of foreign clergy within a religious association, including from one parish to another, require prior government permission. By law, foreigners may not lead religious groups. Authorities may reprimand or expel foreign citizens who officially are present in the country for nonreligious work if they lead any religious activities. Law enforcement agencies on their own initiative or in response to recommendations from other government entities, such as the security service, may require foreign clergy to depart the country – a decision which cannot be appealed.

The country is a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

Government Practices

The August 9 presidential election, which civil society and human rights groups, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom, and the United States, among others, stated was fraudulent, prompted massive peaceful protests. The government responded with what most observers considered a brutal crackdown against what it deemed to be “unauthorized mass events.” Human rights groups reported more than 33,000 persons were detained and at least four killed by security forces by year’s end. Some of the “unauthorized” gatherings were organized by religious groups in response to violent actions by security forces and widely reported human rights abuses. Because religion and politics are often closely linked, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents in which religious communities participated as being solely based on religious identity.

The peaceful public protests generally sought an end to violent action by police and called for the release of political prisoners, investigations into human rights abuses by the authorities, Belarusian leader Alyaksandr Lukashenka’s peaceful departure from office, and new free and fair elections. Those postelection protests that involved public prayer largely focused on calling for peace and an end to violent actions by authorities. Some clergy were among those detained during the postelection protests. For example, on August 13, Orthodox priest Uladzimir Drabysheuski stood in front of the investigative committee office in Homyel holding a banner that said, “Stop the Violence.” A district court convicted him on charges of participating in an unauthorized mass event and sentenced him to 10 days in jail on September 18. He was additionally convicted on similar charges for a protest on September 6 and given a sentence of 15 additional days of arrest on September 28.

Forum 18, an international nongovernmental organization (NGO) focused on international religious freedom, said in October there were “violations of freedom of religion and belief and of the interlinked freedoms of expression, association, and assembly in the country” that “worsened amid widespread continuing protests against falsified results of the August 2020 presidential election and against the regime’s other serious violations of the human rights of the people it rules.” The NGO stated that the government detained and charged individuals with civil penalties for participating in unauthorized mass events when they took part in public prayer events that called for peace and an end to violent actions by security forces in Minsk, Hrodna, Lida, and other cities.

On August 26 and 27, members of religious communities were among the protesters in Minsk’s Freedom Square – also the location of Orthodox and Roman

Catholic cathedrals – who intended to march to Independence Square. During the protest events, Uladzimir Vladimir Mayoraurov, a Protestant, was detained and sentenced to eight days in jail after preaching against violence to riot police in Freedom Square. On August 27, a group of Protestants led by Pastor Taras Telkouski of Trinity Church prayed outside the doors of the Holy Spirit Orthodox Cathedral on Freedom Square and then marched to the nearby Roman Catholic Blessed Virgin Mary Cathedral. Telkouski was detained, charged with “organizing an unauthorized mass event,” and fined 810 rubles (\$310).

According to media reports, on August 16, while security forces indiscriminately detained and beat protesters in Minsk, riot police also detained Aleksandr Fruman. Upon learning that he was an Israeli citizen, police beat him with a rubber truncheon while shouting anti-Semitic insults, according to Fruman, and told him that “it was time to get another circumcision.” He was released a few days later. Jewish community leaders said they observed no increase in anti-Semitism during the postelection protests, and they did not express concerns that their community members who participated were targeted for their ethnicity or religious beliefs by police.

Religious leaders spoke out together against violence and in favor of societal dialogue after the August 9 election, expressing sympathy for those hurt in the violence. On August 14, in his address to Lukashenka and government officials, Archbishop Kondrusiewicz said, “In the name of such a necessary peace in our Fatherland and national harmony, I appeal to authorities to start a constructive dialogue with society, end the violence, and immediately release all innocent citizens detained at peaceful rallies.” He condemned “the bloodshed on the streets, the beating of peaceful demonstrators who want to know the truth, the cruel treatment of detainees, and their detention in inhuman conditions in prisons” as “a grave sin on the conscience of those who give criminal orders and commit violence.” On August 17, then Belarusian Orthodox Metropolitan Pavel visited a Minsk hospital, where he stated that the BOC was apolitical, but he spoke out against violence and noted the hospital’s patients included protesters, bystanders, and those injured in police custody. On August 18, the Catholic Church in Belarus – together with the BOC, Protestant denominations, and Jewish and Islamic communities – hosted an interfaith service in Minsk to pray for a peaceful resolution to the postelection crisis and an end to violence and hatred among all sides. In response, authorities said remarks by religious leaders constituted interference in political affairs.

On August 31, border guards denied Archbishop Kondrusiewicz reentry into the country after a trip to Poland. The Archbishop had spoken out against violent actions by security forces and prayed in front of a detention center in Minsk after unsuccessfully trying to visit peaceful protesters arrested following the August election. Kondrusiewicz, a Belarusian citizen, said he was given no explanation at the border for why he was denied his legal right to return. Authorities said they placed him on a no-entry list and revoked his passport while they probed allegations he maintained multiple citizenships. The Archbishop reportedly only maintained Belarusian citizenship. On December 23, Lukashenka allowed Kondrusiewicz to return, following repeated intervention by the United States, EU member states, and the Vatican.

Religious community leaders condemned the authorities' actions barring Archbishop Kondrusiewicz from the country. Bishop of the Pentecostal communities Leanid Varanenko stated on September 1 that Kondrusiewicz "raised his voice in defense of peace, mercy, and unity and in condemnation of violence, lies, and hatred. This is the spiritual, moral, and ethical duty of any clergy and does not represent political activity."

On April 7, the Prosecutor General's Office refused a request from Russia to extradite member of Jehovah's Witnesses and Russian citizen Nikolai Makhalichev, who was subsequently released after being arrested during an identity check in Haradok, Vitsebsk Oblast, on February 21. Makhalichev applied for asylum on the day of his arrest, and the government later approved his request. He told the press that he was not aware of a criminal case opened against him in Russia in 2019 on charges of "organizing and financing an extremist organization," allegedly based on his religious practice as a member of Jehovah's Witnesses. Jehovah's Witnesses are classified as "extremists" under Russian law.

Human rights defenders said they remained concerned about the authorities' ability to apply charges arbitrarily for organizing, running, or participating in unregistered religious organizations. Authorities did not use this provision of law specifically against religious organizations during the year, but human rights organizations said they continued to view it as a threat against religious freedom.

Christian groups continued to state the registration requirements for religious groups remained complex and difficult to fulfill, which they said restricted their activities, suppressed freedom of religion, and legalized criminal prosecution of individuals for their religious beliefs. The government's guidelines for evaluating

registration applications remained sufficiently broad, they said, to give authorities a pretext for denying applications from disfavored groups.

Nontraditional religious groups continued to state the procedure for registering and using residential premises for religious gatherings remained cumbersome and arbitrary. During the year, authorities in Lida and Barysau rejected applications from communities of Jehovah's Witnesses – two new applications in Lida and an appeal of a denied application in Barysau. In addition, OPRRNA denied two applications from the Jehovah's Witnesses to register a mission.

Some minority religious groups stated that they did not apply for registration because their members feared harassment by authorities and did not want to submit their names, as required by the application process. Other minority religious groups preferred to negotiate registration and other concerns with local authorities, but few registration attempts were made during the year. Some communities said they decided to postpone their registrations until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic due to health concerns.

As of year's end, the government had taken no action on a November 2018 UN Human Rights Committee recommendation that the state repeal mandatory state registration of religious communities.

Many unregistered religious groups stated they continued to maintain a low profile because of fear of prosecution and perceived government hostility. Some registered religious communities said they were reluctant to report restrictions because they feared drawing attention to themselves.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, authorities granted permission on a regular basis to clergy who requested access to visit prisoners. Some clergy were denied permission to visit protestors who had been detained after the August 9 election. Many prisons maintained designated Orthodox religious facilities that Belarusian Orthodox clergy were occasionally allowed to visit through the year.

On September 16, a district court in Lida fined local resident Alyaksandr Shor 270 rubles (\$100) for praying outside the Catholic Church of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. He was part of a group of residents who had gathered to pray there for the return of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz from Poland.

On October 16, a court in Lida fined Roman Catholic and Polish community activist Irena Bernatskaya 810 rubles (\$310) for an "unauthorized mass event" led

by a group called “Mothers in Prayer,” in which participants gathered to pray for an end to violent actions by security forces outside the walls of the local Roman Catholic cathedral on August 12.

On October 21, Slutsk police dispersed a flower-laying ceremony by Slutsk residents to commemorate victims of the Holocaust. The traditional red and white carnations used for the commemorations matched the historical Belarusian national colors that the opposition and protestors adopted as their own and authorities opposed. Police arrived after approximately 12 to 14 persons placed the flowers near a Holocaust memorial. The small group left the area after a police detention van arrived. According to the organizer, the group did not plan a large rally and had not applied for permission to gather in advance. On October 26, at least four Slutsk residents were fined or were sentenced to 10 days in jail for participating in an “unauthorized mass event.”

On November 18, the General Prosecutor's Office issued warnings to BOC spokesperson Father Syarhey Lepin and Catholic Bishop Yury Kasabutski. The two were rebuked for their Facebook criticism of authorities' decision to destroy an unofficial memorial at the site of the beating of Raman Bandarenka, a Minsk resident who died on November 12 after he had been detained and sustained fatal injuries while in police custody. Lepin wrote, “What was the purpose of this diabolic trampling upon candle lamps and icons?” The General Prosecutor said the clergymen's “statements were aggressive” and “increased tension in society [and] stirred up hatred against the government and hostility towards these social groups.” The warnings came after Lukashenka's November 17 remarks that “we can't tolerate this mockery” and his instructions to law enforcement authorities “to make legal assessments of the church officials' words,” since “there will be no memorials heralding a civil war, as they say, in Minsk or elsewhere.” Lepin resigned as BOC spokesperson after the warnings.

On November 30, a court in Ivatsevichy in Brest Oblast tried Greek Catholic priest Vitali Bystrou for participating in an alleged “unauthorized mass event” in the city of Brest on October 25 and sentenced him to 10 days in jail. While police claimed Bystrou was among protesters holding red and white flags, the priest explained he was simply walking from the church to a train station in his religious clothing, which “is acceptable for my faith.”

On December 3, a court in Rasony District sentenced local Roman Catholic priest Vyachaslau Barok to 10 days in jail for propagating Nazi symbols. Barok, who is also a well-known blogger, posted a photograph of a red and green swastika (the

colors of the official Belarusian flag that Lukashenka introduced in 2012) and an emblem with the slogan “Stop Lukascism” on his Instagram account, referencing Lukashenka.

On December 7, police in Vitsebsk arrested local resident Ala Raschinskaya, who had prayed for victims of political repression outside the Catholic cathedral on November 13, and sentenced her to 10 days in jail.

On December 8, authorities in Vitsebsk detained Greek Catholic priest Alyaksei Varanko, Roman Catholic priest Viktor Zhuk, and layman Alyaksei Karyakau for participating in “unauthorized mass events.” They were released the next day after a court dismissed their cases. In a retrial on December 24, the three were warned not to participate in such events in the future.

According to observers, the government continued surveillance of various Protestant denominations. The sources stated that government “ideology officers” (officials in charge of implementing political and social government policies) continued to monitor the activities of members of unregistered religious groups in their workplaces, although there were no reports of prosecutions. Government officials, including from the security forces, reportedly had occasional “informal” talks with members of religious groups to learn about their activities. According to religious leaders, state security officers also continued to attend religious services of registered Protestant communities to conduct surveillance, which group members described as intimidation and harassment.

Religious groups, especially Protestants and Jehovah’s Witnesses, continued to report they remained cautious about proselytizing and distributing religious materials due to their perceptions that they could face intimidation or punishment.

Orthodox literature remained available countrywide. According to media accounts, the BOC was free to proselytize without restrictions on television and in print media as well as in public spaces. Unlike other religious groups, the BOC continued to participate in government-sponsored public events, such as rallies or celebrations, without the need to seek prior approval from authorities. For example, on July 3, the Belarusian Orthodox Metropolitan participated in the annual “Belarus Remembers” Independence Day commemoration along with Lukashenka, veterans, public officials, soldiers, civil society representatives, and Minsk residents. In addition, regional authorities often engaged BOC representatives in their events. On June 5, forestry officials in the town of Slonim and students and faculty of the Minsk Spiritual Seminary planted birch and pine

trees, an event which the BOC reported was inspired and organized by Navahrudak Diocese archpriest Dimitri Syemukha.

The national government approved the importation of literature requested by Jehovah's Witnesses during the year.

After religious leaders called on the security forces to end violent action against peaceful protestors and urged a genuine national dialogue between Lukashenka and the opposition, state-run Radio Belarus One stopped the nationwide broadcast of the 40-minute Roman Catholic Sunday masses from the Cathedral of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Minsk, as well as a brief news summary from Vatican Radio on August 23. Roman Catholic leadership noted the importance of broadcasts during the COVID-19 pandemic, when believers chose not to attend services in order to limit the spread of COVID-19. The state-run Belarusian TV and Radio Company refused to air the annual December 25 Christmas message from the Roman Catholic Church without explanation. The television station did, however, stream the Roman Catholic midnight Mass on December 24.

Authorities continued to deny requests to give the Belarus-based Catholic radio station Radio Mariya a media broadcasting license that would supplement its internet broadcasting. The Ministry of Information denied Radio Mariya's fifth application in April.

According to local religious groups, communities chose not to pursue many new purchases or rentals of properties as places of worship during the year, partially due to the political situation and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, many communities reported that they did not believe that they faced impediments to purchases or rentals of sanctioned places of worship. Some religious communities with outstanding property cases continued to engage with the government and the legal system to resolve them. Converting residential property for religious use remained difficult. Protestant groups stated they continued to be more severely affected than other groups because they were less likely to own religious facilities, and they said they could not apply for permission to conduct religious activities in private homes because residences were too small to accommodate their numbers.

Saint Simon and Helena Roman Catholic Church parish continued to use its existing church building (also known as the "Red Church"), even though it was owned by the government. During the year, Minsk city authorities billed the parish for costs related to 2018-2019 renovation work, in addition to monthly rent, utilities, and real estate and land taxes, which amounted to a total of 160,000 rubles

(\$61,600) for 2019. The parish continued to refuse to pay for the land tax, property tax, and renovation work. The parish in 2020 was billed 12,000 rubles (\$4,600) monthly. On July 21, St. Simon and Helena Church community members launched a petition seeking the return of the building from the government and collected more than 5,000 signatures in support.

Because of its location in one of Minsk's main protest sites, authorities occasionally restricted access to the Red Church or chased protesters into it. On August 26, riot police pushed peaceful protesters and journalists into the church and stood guard at the doors, effectively locking them in for approximately an hour. Many of those forced inside engaged in prayer until they were allowed to leave. The government changed the locks on the church's doors the next day, leaving the parish with one set of keys. Authorities also reportedly cut electricity to the building during rallies outside the church on August 23-25. On August 26, the then-vicar general of the Minsk-Mahilyou Archdiocese, Bishop Yury Kasabutski, condemned the "unacceptable and illegal actions" of riot police and the government and called on authorities to investigate incidents and guarantee freedom of conscience and expression. On September 11, riot police blocked entrances into the church to prevent protesters from hiding inside and detained a number of protesters who fled there. Police reportedly did not detain worshippers or individuals in the church who were present to pray.

Representatives of the Roman Catholic, Belarusian Orthodox, and Protestant communities said authorities did not charge them fees for their religious events. In some cases, however, community leaders had to take personal responsibility for maintaining order and safety at such events. Observers stated that the system of reimbursements for security, medical, and cleaning services for organizers of mass events adopted in 2019 was not intended to prohibit regular worship, nor was it doing so in practice. There were fewer religious events in 2020 due in part to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. For the ones that were held, authorities did not charge fees, seek reimbursements, or implement other restrictions that had previously forced organizers to cancel similar events.

According to media reports, school administrators continued to cooperate only with the BOC among registered religious groups, based on the BOC's concordat with the government. School administrators continued to invite Belarusian Orthodox priests to lecture to students, organize tours of Church facilities, and participate in Belarusian Orthodox festivities, programs, and humanitarian projects.

On January 23, Lukashenka signed a decree allocating 1.2 million rubles (\$474,000) from reserve funds to cover salaries of professors and employees, as well as stipends for students, of the Belarusian Orthodox seminaries. Protestant groups and the Roman Catholic Church said their schools did not receive any financial support from the government.

On March 26, the BOC and the Ministry of Education signed a 2020-2025 program of cooperation, noting the importance of continued engagement between the church and the government. The program included seminars, lectures, tours to BOC sites, and joint commemorations and celebrations.

Religious groups said the government continued to apply visa regulations inconsistently, which affected the ability of foreign missionaries to live and work in the country. On September 2, OPRRNA on short notice canceled permission to work and preach for Father Jerzy Wilk, a Polish citizen and priest of St. Michael the Archangel Church in the village of Varapaeva in the Vitsebsk region. Wilk departed the country shortly afterwards after having served the community since 2003. While OPRRNA gave no explanation for the decision, representatives of religious communities continued to say that unofficially the government wanted local religious communities to train local citizens as clergy rather than rely on foreigners.

On September 29, Bishop Kasabutski denied allegations that the Roman Catholic Church was used by external forces for political purposes. In a sermon, he said the political allegations made by the head of Russia's Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), Sergei Naryshkin, as reported by the SVR press service on September 29, were "fake." The bishop added that Naryshkin's allegations that "the United States of America, the CIA, and other organizations are trying to use the Roman Catholic Church to undermine the state system in [Belarus]" were absurd and were "a lie that has nothing to do with the truth." He said, "Today the Roman Catholic Church tells the truth about the situation in the country, denounces the violence, and calls for solidarity, unity, concord, peace and forgiveness," adding, "This is how we probably prevent someone from implementing certain scenarios aimed at causing a split in our society and bloodshed." The bishop also dismissed speculation about tensions in relations among various religious groups in the country. State media reported only Naryshkin's allegations against the Catholic Church and not the bishop's statements.

Roman Catholic bishops continued to state that foreign priests faced multiple challenges, including a lengthy government approval process before obtaining

permission to celebrate Mass; visas often issued for only three to six months; and administrative difficulties when trying to renew visas. In August, however, local bishops reported that authorities renewed all requested visa applications that had been submitted or were pending review.

According to Forum 18, the government continued to refuse Klemens Werth, a Catholic priest from Russia, permission to engage in religious work. He was allowed to remain in Vitsebsk to continue building a new church, but since he was a foreigner, he was banned from celebrating Mass or otherwise serving.

During the year, Lukashenka repeatedly stated that the political unrest in the country had been supported and financed by Poland along with the Baltic states and the West more broadly. He said the Roman Catholic Church was involved. After authorities barred Archbishop Kondrusiewicz from reentering the country from Poland, Lukashenka stated on September 1 that the Archbishop, a Belarusian citizen, had received “instructions” while in Poland on how to “destroy” Belarus. On November 2, Lukashenka said, “The BOC is not bringing clergy from abroad, from countries foreign to our country, as it is being done by some other denominations. We cannot accept any clergy from Poland when Catholic Poland has taken such a [hostile] position against us. It is not normal.” He urged the Roman Catholic Church to train “more local clergy.”

During the year, the leaders of New Life Church in Minsk continued discussions with city authorities on its status and operations. The government froze the assets of the Church in 2010. The Church continued to use its building for religious purposes, but there were no developments regarding the asset freeze, which remained in place at year’s end.

Authorities continued to permit the BOC to collect charitable donations in public as well as on its religious property. While the law does not restrict other religious groups from raising donations in public, representatives of these groups said authorities continued to limit their fundraising activities to their own places of worship or other properties. The groups said they faced government harassment if they tried to raise donations at other locations.

During the year, the Jewish community and foreign donors worked with local authorities to erect eight privately funded monuments that commemorated victims of the Holocaust in the villages of Doubrouna, Lukoml, Chyreya, Slaveni, and two in the town of Budslau as well as in other locations.

Speaking at a January 27 event to commemorate International Holocaust Remembrance Day, Deputy Foreign Minister Andrey Dapkiunas emphasized the importance of commemorating the Holocaust “in reiterating the moral, political, and social meaning of the call ‘Never Again,’” which, he said, was “a challenge that still faces humanity – one that demands continuous work.” The chairman of the House of Representatives, Uladzimir Andreichanka, joined world leaders at the January 23 World Holocaust Forum in Jerusalem, and the deputy chairman of the Council of the Republic, Anatoly Isachanka, attended the ceremony marking the 75th anniversary of the liberation of the Auschwitz-Birkenau concentration camp in Poland.

On October 15, the Vitsebsk Jewish community, private donors from Russia, and local authorities unveiled a memorial honoring the 350-year-long history of the local Jewish population at the site of the Jewish cemetery in the village of Yanavichy in Vitebsk Oblast. Community members and local authorities also cleaned the cemetery and cataloged unearthed gravestones.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

An interreligious working group comprising the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Union of Evangelical Christian Baptists, Union of Evangelical-Lutheran Churches, and Jewish religious communities organized seminars and educational events, some of which were virtual due to COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. The theme for 2020 was “Religions in Belarus in the Period of Social Transformations.” The group held an in-person seminar on February 12 on spiritual development of the country’s society in the context of social justice. In April, the group held an interreligious youth forum that involved seminars dedicated to the “contribution of different religious communities in resolving environmental issues in the interest of Belarus’s sustainable development.” In June, the group organized a seminar targeting youth and discussing different faiths and new methods for the spiritual and moral upbringing of youth and children. On December 21, the group held an online seminar, “Religions in the Context of Innovations in Society and the Economy.”

Anti-Semitic comments appeared on social media and in comment sections of local online news articles, although it was not clear that all of the comments could be attributed to Belarusians.

The BOC continued its annual commemoration in honor of Hauryl Belastoksky (Gabriel of Bialystok), a child allegedly killed by Jews in Bialystok in 1690. The

Russian Orthodox Church considers him one of its saints and martyrs, and the BOC falls under the authority of the Russian Church on traditional practices such as this. Jewish community leaders continued to express concern over the traditional memorial prayer recited on the anniversary of Belastoksky's death on May 3, which states the "martyred and courageous Hauryl exposed Jewish dishonesty" although a trial after the boy's death acquitted the Jew who was charged with the crime. The BOC in recent years removed some anti-Semitic references about Belastoksky from its online materials and focused more on his role as a regional patron saint of children. Prayers for the commemoration reportedly continued to include anti-Semitic references, however.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials met with government representatives to discuss religious issues. Throughout the year, the Charge d'Affaires regularly engaged with officials at the highest levels of government on issues related to religious freedom, registration of religious communities, and anti-Semitism.

The U.S. Secretary of State and the Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom issued several public statements in support of Archbishop Kondrusiewicz, calling for authorities to allow him to return to the country to lead his religious community after being refused reentry from Poland.

The Charge d'Affaires and other embassy officials continued to meet regularly with representatives of the BOC, Roman Catholic Church, Protestants, and minority religious groups as well as with civil society activists and lawyers for religious groups to learn about religious activities and discuss government actions that affected religious freedom. They discussed anti-Semitism and the preservation of Jewish religious heritage with Jewish religious groups as well as government restrictions on registration and operations with Jehovah's Witnesses and Protestant groups. Embassy officials also continued to hold regular discussions about restrictions on religious freedom with religious freedom activists, religious leaders, lawyers for religious groups, and representatives of the For Freedom of Religion initiative, a group of civil society activists promoting religious tolerance. Embassy officials posted the Secretary of State's speeches and other materials related to religious freedom on social media.